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## German Immigrants and American Politics: Problems of Leadership, Parties, and Issues

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### CHAPTER III

# German Immigrants and American Politics: Problems of Leadership, Parties, and Issues

*by*

*Frederick C. Luebke*

For a hundred years, from the Age of Jackson to the Era of Franklin Roosevelt, German Americans complained about the political apathy they perceived to be characteristic of their ethnic group. As they saw it, German immigrants tended to be phlegmatic or lethargic when it came to political matters, at least in contrast to the vigor and industry they displayed in their economic pursuits. The Germans also appeared to be politically backward and ineffective, at least in comparison to the Irish. In this view, apathy explained why the number of German Americans nominated and elected to political office was rarely commensurate with the proportion of German Americans in the electorate. The frequently voiced complaint went still further: American politicians paid insufficient attention to the needs and desires of their German constituents, and they rarely seemed to appreciate the magnificent contributions Germans had made to American greatness.

There was, of course, a substantial factual basis for these charges, depending upon one's definition of political behavior and the role of politics in a multiethnic, democratic society. Most of the critics took a narrow view of politics; for them, it was primarily a matter of voting and holding office. But a meaningful assessment of political behavior encompasses much more, such as becoming a citizen, paying taxes, assuming jury duty, and serving in the armed forces. It takes in any discussion of political issues and the relationships of an

ethnic group to governmental and political processes, in newspapers, editorials, public addresses, or sermons, and it also includes the influence such activity may have on the formation of public policy. Thus, for a German-American clergyman to take a stand on the compelling issues of the day—slavery, prohibition, compulsory public school education, neutrality in world wars—or to refuse on theological grounds to take a stand on such issues, is also to behave politically. One cannot easily separate political behavior from other activities. It is woven into the fabric of life, with all its complexities and contradictions; it reflects relationships with work, play, beliefs, values, and aspirations.

Although such a comprehensive view of political behavior is not new, few recent studies of German-American political history have placed ethnic leaders in such an enlarged social and cultural context. Officeholding, for example, has not been studied systematically or with appropriate comparisons. There is good evidence that many German-born persons held minor political office already in the pre-Civil War era, but we do not know how their activity compares to that of either the native-born or other immigrant groups. We know also that only five persons of German birth have ever been elected to the United States Senate. But that fact has little meaning unless it is compared statistically to the record of other groups.

Another important aspect of ethnic officeholding concerns pre-emigration experience. The Irish, for example, had acquired crucial political skills in their long struggle against English dominance in Ireland. Accustomed to questioning the legitimacy of formal government, they felt comfortable in America with the extralegal arrangements developed by 19th-century urban political machines. In addition, the Irish had no language barrier to impede their political acculturation. By contrast, German immigrants, speaking a foreign tongue and accustomed to authoritarian regimes buttressed by the church, brought little political experience to America. Moreover, Germans were much more likely than the Irish to settle on farms, where isolation from political activity was more or less inevitable in the 19th century. In the cities, however, Germans generally enjoyed better economic prospects because of their crafts, education, and wealth than did the Irish, whose poverty and lack of skills forced them to pursue any means of survival, including the political. Thus, the Irish immigrant as policeman and ward politician became a fixture in our national mythology, but we can hardly imagine a German equivalent.

Political involvement was discouraged by some of the German immigrant churches. The Mennonites in particular were committed to the doctrine of the two kingdoms—the sacred and the secular—and taught that, while the Christian was in the world, he was not of it. Politics was a worldly snare, according to this view, and was to be avoided except in those cases when the defense of the faith demanded it. Certain German Lutheran theologians, especially of the Missouri Synod, held similar views. Insisting upon a total

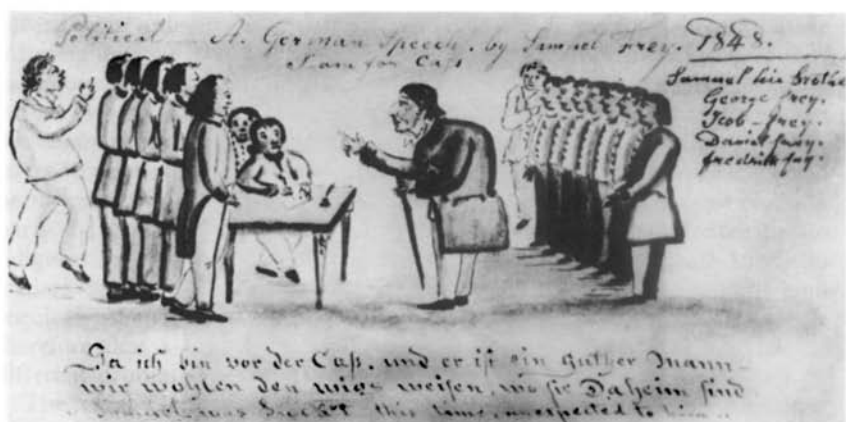


Fig. 1: *Political—A German Speech by Samuel Frey* (watercolor and ink, by Lewis Miller, ca. 1848) suggests the political isolation of many Pennsylvania German settlers who could be reached only by those who spoke the local dialects. In fact, large numbers of rural Germans remained outside the American political process because of their self-imposed isolation or the inability of party organizations to mobilize them. (Courtesy of Historical Society of York County, Pa.)

separation of church and state, they explicitly encouraged a spirit of separatism as a means of preserving their “pure doctrine” and shielding the young from the allurements of a sinful world. Politics in America, these theologians believed, was hopelessly corrupt; as a group, politicians were greedy, ignorant hacks given to bribery and demagoguery. Such attitudes naturally precluded any encouragement to political officeholding by the laity.

Another important question regarding officeholding by immigrants concerns the relationship between the official and his ethnic group. Did a German-born holder of high political office see himself as a representative of his own ethnic group, or did he rise above such considerations in order to serve broader constituencies? It seems clear that an ethnic politician could successfully adopt the former role only under special conditions, such as when his group comprised the majority (or its functional equivalent) in his electoral unit or when ethnic group interest happened to coincide with the majority view. In the 19th century, Irish-American politicians in such cities as New York, Boston, and Chicago often enjoyed these circumstances, but the electoral constituencies of German-American politicians were usually less highly concentrated. More important, German-American voters were frequently spread across the socio-economic spectrum and hence rarely held uniform views on the political issues of the day. In other words, the German ethnic community, unlike the Irish, was ordinarily so diverse, with its rich and poor,





Fig. 2: German Americans supported the Pennsylvania German farmer, Joseph Ritner, in his several bids for the governorship in the 1830s. Ritner styled himself the farmer's friend in his campaigns, and early on adopted symbols of his German and agricultural ties. (Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission)

its educated and uneducated, its skilled and unskilled workers, its urban as well as rural residents, its Catholics and Protestants, that unity in support of anything or anyone was rarely possible to achieve. Hence, the numerous lamentations about the lack of German unity by the most idealistic of German-American leaders, who, it is worth noting, were usually journalists, not practicing politicians.

Such leaders understood, of course, that the Germans in America were a remarkably diverse and divided group. They hoped, however, that unity could be achieved through an appeal to German idealism, whatever its relationship may have been to the issues of the day. But such a notion was fundamentally elitist in character and ignored the fact that ordinary voters were more likely to be moved by practical "bread-and-butter" considerations. This is not to suggest that the common folk lacked idealism, but rather that the things they

valued were ordered differently. Thus, we have the familiar rhetoric of the forty-eighters—that grand generation of political refugees—who were outraged by slavery in a republic and whose idealism usually led them to strong support for Abraham Lincoln and the newly founded Republican party. Yet the common people among the Germans in America noticed that in many states Republican leaders were often persons who just a few years earlier had been prominently associated with the nativist, anti-Catholic Know Nothing party. Moreover, ordinary German Americans, who often had close ties to religious institutions, also observed that the prominent German-American leaders were usually anticlerical freethinkers or atheists, some of whom regularly castigated the churches and their clergy. It should not surprise us therefore that a large proportion of German-American voters marched to different drummers and voted Democratic.

The vocal German idealists were also highly critical of the American political system and its apparent pragmatic qualities. Despite their intelligence and erudition, they failed to understand that pragmatism was a necessary ingredient in the American political recipe and they were too impatient or disdainful to discover this truth through experience. Nor did they understand that the Constitution of the United States, through its provisions for an electoral college, indirectly and unintentionally dictated a two-party system. Thus, from the 1850s to the 1920s, from Karl Heinzen to George Sylvester Viereck, we have examples of German-American leaders who were advocates of a German-American political party—a third party united on the basis of German idealism that would hold the balance of power. By positioning itself between the two major parties, such an organization presumably could force one or the other major party to do its bidding. Ironically, the bald pragmatism inherent in this approach was espoused in the name of idealism.

The advocates of this strategy, believing in the superiority of German idealism and in the power of their logic, naively hoped to transcend German-American heterogeneity to forge an ethnic unity and thus an effective voting bloc. But they failed to see that their efforts could generate only resentment and disdain among non-German political leaders. An ethnic politician who tried to force one or the other party to support the interests or ideals of his group could never expect to attain a position of power or influence in a major party. Such a strategy would inevitably narrow the base of his support. The most that could be expected was that a major party would temporarily bend to support the minority interest, but the long-range effect would be to remove ethnic leaders from genuine political power within the major party structures.

In the American system, especially in the 19th century, advancement in political officeholding was a concomitant of loyalty to party and not to the ideals of a minority ethnic group. If a politician worked faithfully and consistently for his party, he could expect to move gradually to higher levels of

leadership, authority, and power. This system, however, placed a considerable strain on the typical German-American politician. If advancement is linked to party loyalty, it is incumbent upon the politician to support his party even in those instances when it pursues a course contrary to ethnic group interest or to ethnically defined ideals. Faced with this dilemma, those German-American politicians who chose loyalty to party over idealism were forced to abandon strong identification with their ethnic group; those who chose loyalty to idealism over party could not win reelection.



Fig. 3: Carl Schurz was the most prominent German in 19th-century America. He parlayed an indifferent military career and his supposed strength among German-American voters into several important political appointments, but he relied on his good connections in the Republican party as much as anything in pushing his career. (Civil War Library and Museum, Philadelphia)

An example of the latter is the revered Carl Schurz. Schurz was truly a man of extraordinary talents—a brilliant journalist and orator, minister to Spain, Civil War general, senator from Missouri, secretary of the interior, and, at least by his own account, a confidant of most presidents from Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt. Americans generally paid attention to Carl Schurz only when he transcended ethnic politics to speak and act on issues that were important to the entire nation. His idealism led him to oppose slavery, to support Lincoln, to advocate Radical Republicanism in the Reconstruction era, and later to lead the Liberal Republican movement. In those instances his views were shared by countless Americans of reformist tendencies; the fact that they were rooted in his German culture was incidental to his success. But when Schurz tried to function as an ethnic politician, he was less successful. He was elected to only one office—by the Missouri legislature, not by the voters of Missouri directly—and he had no chance of reelection. It is true that Lincoln and other political leaders perceived him as being exceptionally influential with German voters and that they sometimes fashioned their strategies accordingly; yet there is no convincing evidence that Schurz was actually able “to deliver the German vote,” especially among the thousands of Catholics, Lutherans, and other church people who distrusted him. Ultimately, Schurz’s real eminence was as an *American* statesman, not as a



Fig. 4: Senator Robert F. Wagner built his political career without reference to his German-American background. By 1936, when he helped President Franklin D. Roosevelt rally support for the presidential campaign at Madison Square Garden in New York, there was no German-American political constituency to speak of anyway. (Robert F. Wagner Papers, Columbia University)



German American. His effectiveness emerged from his eloquent exposition of national issues, not those that preoccupied the attention of the German-American ethnic group.

Senator Robert Wagner of New York typifies those German-born politicians who chose loyalty to party over ethnic idealism. Invariably loyal to the Democratic party, Wagner pragmatically pursued policies that were framed by the interests of his multi-ethnic constituency. Throughout his career as a Democratic politician, from urban wards in New York to the U.S. Senate, Wagner always played down his German birth. Although he was interested in the affairs of the Roland Society (a German Democratic political organization in New York City), he never gave it publicity. In the end, his record of legislative accomplishment as the champion of the interests of the common, laboring people in New York and the nation easily exceeded the achievements attained by Schurz. One specialized in words, the other in deeds.

Wagner's long political career, which spanned four decades, was thus largely independent of the Germans as a special interest group and therefore of the vagaries of ethnic politics. Unlike the Irish or the blacks, who were united by economic deprivation, social ostracism, and religious discrimination, the generally more prosperous Germans had no reason to act in concert except to defend their culture. Issues capable of stimulating the Germans to unite politically, such as prohibition and attacks on parochial schools, were usually temporary. When the threat faded, so did opportunities for political leadership based on German group interest. Moreover, the defense of German ethnic culture was essentially a negative enterprise. It was usually a question of what the Germans were *against* rather than what they were *for*. If a German-American political leader had no reason for existence other than the defense of ethnic culture, he inevitably sounded strident, uncompromising, and unattractive to non-immigrant voters.

Still, ethnocultural clashes were endemic in the 19th century, and the

political conflict they generated flared from time to time and from place to place, sometimes with remarkable intensity. An early controversy concerned questions of citizenship and the right to vote and hold office. Nativist fears of immigrant voters were greatly augmented in the 1830s and 1840s as huge numbers of Irish and Germans arrived in the United States. Because most of the former and probably half of the latter were Roman Catholics, they imported a value system that sometimes contrasted sharply with the pietistic Protestantism characteristic of American society at that time. Eager to limit the influence of such immigrants in the political process, many old-stock Americans used the Whig party to attack the status of the foreign-born as equal citizens.



Fig. 5: Anti-Catholicism was the driving force behind much of antebellum nativism. German Catholics probably suffered less than the Irish, but they came in for some drubbings in urban riots, such as the 1844 Philadelphia riot, depicted here, when Protestant mobs assailed Catholics. (Library Company of Philadelphia)

Nativism took on a variety of forms and goaded many thousands of ordinary German immigrants to act politically on the local level, where they usually affiliated with the Democratic party. The Democrats, inspired by Jeffersonian concepts of the negative state and spurred by the Jacksonian rhetoric of egalitarianism, were pleased to have immigrant voters add to their strength. In the 1850s, as immigration soared to new heights and as the old Whig party foundered on the rocks of slavery, nativism and anti-Catholicism became the driving force behind the short-lived Know Nothing party. In some states, this organization was quickly superseded or displaced by the new Republican party. Determined to halt the extension of slavery into the territories, if not to abolish it, the party of Abraham Lincoln rested on an ideology attractive to the articulate, educated political refugees of the 1848 Revolution. Many common



Fig. 6: Know Nothings yoked Germans and Irish immigrants together as intemperate and, in this illustration, as politically corrupt. (New York Public Library)

folk among the German immigrants also rallied behind this new banner, most dramatically in Missouri, where Republicanism was free of the taint of Know Nothingism. But elsewhere, especially in districts distant from slave states where German workers feared the competition of free blacks, many German voters remained true to the Democracy as a bulwark against nativism. Nevertheless, the essentially erroneous idea that German voters had provided the margin of victory for Lincoln in 1860 became fixed in the minds of many political leaders.

In the decades following the Civil War, the majority of German-American voters in most states drifted back to the Democratic party. This was generally true of Catholic Germans and, less consistently, of Lutherans. Other German Protestants, especially those of pietistic tendencies, continued to find Republicanism congenial.

This division of the German vote along religious lines rested partly in differing views about the role of government in questions of morality. Old-stock Americans, overwhelmingly Protestant, tended to believe that religion was a matter of the heart, not the head—that it was more emotional than intellectual—a matter of “right behavior” more than “right belief.” Emphasis was accordingly placed on the conversion experience and a pious life as marks of God’s having chosen a person for eternal salvation. According to this view, the Christian life was a constant struggle against Satan and sin, and as the sincere Christian did battle with the forces of evil, he was expected to use all legitimate weapons to vanquish the foe, including the power and authority of the government. Thus, slavery should be rendered unconstitutional; the slavery of alcohol should be legislated out of existence; pious, God-fearing women should be enlisted in the battle through woman suffrage; Sabbath-day proprieties should be preserved by means of a multitude of so-called blue laws; and by various regulatory measures, the schools of the immigrants should be hindered so that public schools could socialize the children to proper Protestant values. Many German Evangelicals, Baptists, and Methodists were in basic agreement with this view and therefore in

varying degrees supported the Republican party, which generally supported these measures.

But programs of coercive reform were offensive to large numbers of German Catholics and Lutherans, especially of the more theologically orthodox or conservative synods. For them, religion was more creedal, more formal, more authoritarian. In their view, the central role of government was to guarantee the fullest measure of personal liberty consonant with law and order. For the government to legislate morality by means of prohibition or Sabbatarian legislation was to invade the authority of the church. They argued, for example, that a bottle of whiskey, by itself, was neither good nor evil. Sin lay in its abuse: it was not wrong to drink, but it was a sin to get drunk. Similarly, many Germans were appalled at the effect that Sabbath laws could have on their traditions of "continental Sundays"—amiable conversation, convivial drinking, and innocent dancing in beer gardens or, for that matter, at church picnics. From their standpoint, woman suffrage was merely a political trick to double the prohibitionist vote. Worse, it threatened the role of women as wives and mothers and thereby the centrality of the family. As for restrictive school legislation, both Catholic and Lutheran Germans could unite against it, as they did in Wisconsin and Illinois *circa* 1890, to shatter the dominance of the Republican party when it supported the regulation of parochial schools. After all, they thought, the public schools were little more than tax-supported institutions for pietistic Protestants.

**Attention Workingmen!**

**MASS-MEETING**

**TO-NIGHT, at 7.30 o'clock,**

**HAYMARKET, Randolph St. Bet. Desplaines and Halsted.**

Good Speakers will be present to denounce the latest atrocious act of the police, the shooting of our fellow workmen yesterday afternoon.

**Workingmen Arm Yourselves and Appear in Full Force!**

**THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

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**Achtung, Arbeiter!**

**Große**

**Massen-Versammlung**

**Heute Abend, 7 1/2 Uhr, auf dem**

**Heumarkt, Randolph-Strasse, zwischen**

**Desplaines- u. Halsted-Str.**

Es werden Redner sein, die den neuesten Verbrechen der Polizei gegen die Arbeiter denkwürdigen Gedenktage gedenken.

Wir bitten die Arbeiter, bewaffnet (auch mit eisernen Fäusteln) zu kommen!

Das Exekutiv-Komitee

Fig. 7: Many Americans blamed the Haymarket Square riot, in Chicago in 1886, on Germans because German anarchists distributed bilingual handbills calling for workers' protests and because several German anarchists were arrested during the mayhem. Four German anarchists were executed after being convicted of murdering Chicago policemen at Haymarket. (Randall Miller Collection)



As a result, ethnocultural issues were capable of producing remarkable majorities among German voters for the Democratic party in state and local elections late in the 19th century. It is important, however, not to overstate the case. Pietistic Germans, of course, tended to remain Republican. Furthermore, Christian religious polarities had little relevance for the anticlerical intelligentsia and none at all for the German Jews, while urban workers attracted by socialist doctrines rejected such notions as detractions from the struggle against economic oppression in an industrializing America.

In general, the pattern of German voting behavior underwent a transformation in the 1890s. The symbolic politics of the 1870s and '80s continued to be important in those states, counties, or cities where ethnocultural issues were raised, but in other respects German-American voters responded more strongly as constituents of other collectivities—that is, as farmers, factory workers, merchants, mechanics, teamsters, teachers, saloon keepers, or as rich men or poor, as young persons or old, as veterans of the nation's wars, or as opponents of imperialistic foreign policies. This became especially clear during the Populist era of the 1890s, when urgent economic issues, including currency reform, railroad regulation, and tariff questions, reduced the salience of ethocultural conflicts. In some states distinctive German voting almost disappeared. Nevertheless, historic attachments of certain German subgroups continued for many more decades, even though they were less firm than formerly. Catholic Germans, for example, tended to remain loyal to the



Fig. 8: German-born Governor John Peter Altgeld of Illinois drew support from German Americans in his successful campaign for the governorship in 1892, but his political career collapsed after he pardoned the three surviving anarchists convicted in the Haymarket riot and after he interceded on behalf of striking workers at the Pullman works. (Illinois State Historical Society)

Democratic party, but it became easier for them to be dislodged from that adherence, at least temporarily. Independent voting among Germans, as among Americans generally, increased significantly in the early decades of the 20th century.

At the same time, foreign policy issues increased in importance for many German Americans. In earlier decades, before the creation of the German Empire in 1871, few German immigrants regarded the governments of their home states in Europe with affection. Most German states had been authoritarian, repressive, intolerant of religious diversity, and unresponsive to the needs of the common people. But many German-American hearts swelled with pride as Bismarck whipped the French in 1871 and placed his Prussian king on an imperial German throne. Although thousands of Germans had emigrated to escape military service, their pulses quickened at the news of German victories on European battlefields. A new sense of German-American ethnicity developed as the number of immigrants from rapidly industrializing Germany declined, and ethnocentric publicists deliberately cultivated a new pride in things German to halt the erosion of the German-American community caused by assimilation. This movement was institutionalized on a national level in the creation of the National German-American Alliance,



Fig. 9: German Americans generally praised Bismarck for forging a modern Germany, but some Americans, flushed with their own nationalism and forgetful of their own bloody Civil War to secure the nation, found Bismarck's strategy of "blood and iron" frightening. The association of Germans with militarism formed rapidly in the late 19th century. (American Antiquarian Society)

which during the early years of the 20th century claimed an inflated membership in the millions.

Such activity came to an abrupt end during World War I. Throughout the neutrality period of 1914–17, the German ethnic leaders and associations such as the National German-American Alliance worked tirelessly for American neutrality, hoping thereby to prevent the United States from joining the Allied powers against Germany. Countless speeches and editorials were written in support of neutrality, against Britain and France, and in defense of Germany;

many hundreds of churches, *Vereine*, and other organizations conducted fund-raising campaigns, rallies, and bazaars for the German Red Cross. The effect was to create an illusory image of strength and unity among German Americans. Most prominent German-American leaders perceived President Woodrow Wilson as a partisan of the Allied cause and therefore opposed his reelection in 1916. Among the masses of German-American voters, however, there was no such unanimity, even though they displayed a slight shift toward the Republican candidate.

In April 1917, only a few months after the election of 1916, the United States Congress, at President Wilson's request, declared war on Germany. Suddenly, behavior that had been perfectly legal (though indiscreet) in the neutrality period became unpatriotic, if not treasonable. Thousands of superpatriotic Americans now believed it to be their duty to wage a war on German culture on the domestic front. German-language newspapers were subjected to crippling censorship, German-language instruction in the schools was nearly eliminated, and all manifestations of German culture—from the performance of Beethoven's symphonies to the presentation of Schiller's plays—were discouraged, if not expressly forbidden. Innumerable acts of oppression were committed against innocent German-American citizens, whose loyalty to their adopted country was now under suspicion. In varying degrees, national, state, and especially local governments supported the anti-German hysteria. For many German Americans, Wilson became the symbolic source of their persecution, and many thousands sullenly awaited the day when they could punish Wilson's party in the privacy of a voting booth.

Already in the off-year election of 1918, the Germans, especially in the midwestern states, registered a sharp drop in Democratic voting. Two years later, when Democratic Governor James Cox of Ohio ran for president as a Wilson surrogate, the Germans had their revenge. Even though there were nagging domestic problems of inflation, labor unrest, and agricultural discontent, German voters tended to ignore them as they turned to the Republican candidate, Warren Harding, in dramatic numbers. It was not that they were *for* Harding; it was that they were *against* Wilsonism as represented by Cox. Once again, negativism characterized German-American voting.

Scores of German-American precincts recorded enormous margins for the Republican candidate, sometimes at a ratio of 100 to 1, especially in German Protestant communities. Even in German Catholic precincts in rural Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota, Democratic voting dropped to a third of what it had been four years earlier. In Milwaukee, where German voters found both the Democrats and Republicans wanting, they turned in huge numbers to Eugene Debs, the Socialist candidate, who at that moment remained in a federal prison, a victim of the wartime Espionage Act. Similarly, in Minnesota, thousands of Germans supported the Farmer-Labor party.

The politics of revenge continued through the 1920s. By 1924 German-



American spokesmen became more assertive as they endorsed the futile third-party presidential candidacy of Robert M. LaFollette, the senator from Wisconsin, who had come to symbolize resistance to American participation in World War I. That LaFollette's Progressive ideology was in sharp contrast to the Republican conservatism the Germans had supported four years earlier mattered little. They loved him for what he had opposed, not for what he favored. Party loyalty meant nothing to them; what mattered most was that a candidate oppose British and French dominance in world affairs and any arrangements that perpetuated the prescriptions of the Treaty of Versailles.

The majority of the German-language newspapers backed LaFollette, and German Americans supplied a substantial part of his vote. Still, careful analysis reveals that old divisions among the Germans remained, both in leadership and voting behavior. This was laid bare in 1928, when the Democratic party candidacy of New York Governor Al Smith, the very symbol of urban ethnic politics, was simply too much for Protestant German voters. The pietists rejected Smith because he was "wet"; the Lutherans, because he was Catholic. But Herbert Hoover was also controversial. Some German Americans insisted that because Hoover was allegedly of German descent and because he had saved many thousands of Germans from starvation in Europe after World War I he deserved their support. Others dismissed him as a prohibitionist conservative who would surely follow a pro-British foreign policy.

So hopeless had the effort to unify the German-American vote become that thereafter most German ethnic publicists abandoned the concept and concentrated instead on cultural goals. This was not true, however, of the notorious German-American Nazis. Their strategy of blood and strong-arm tactics was repugnant to all but a tiny minority and revealed that they understood nothing about either American politics or the essential character of the German ethnic group in the United States. Still, many leaders of the German-American churches, the German-language press, and the old established societies were reluctant to repudiate Nazism, either in Germany or America, so earnestly did they desire a strong place for Germany in international affairs and so deeply did their affection for things German run.

Since the mid-1930s, German-American political behavior has taken on a substantially different character. In earlier decades there had been open and vocal attempts to organize the German Americans into a bloc of voters unified by ethnic group concerns. The German-language press had taken strong positions and had argued them forcefully and sometimes stridently; organizations had been created to marshal the German-American vote on a national scale. But as the assimilation process took its toll of ethnic consciousness, Hitlerian brutality and Nazi excess transformed German ethnicity in America into a source of social and psychological discomfort, if not distress. The overt



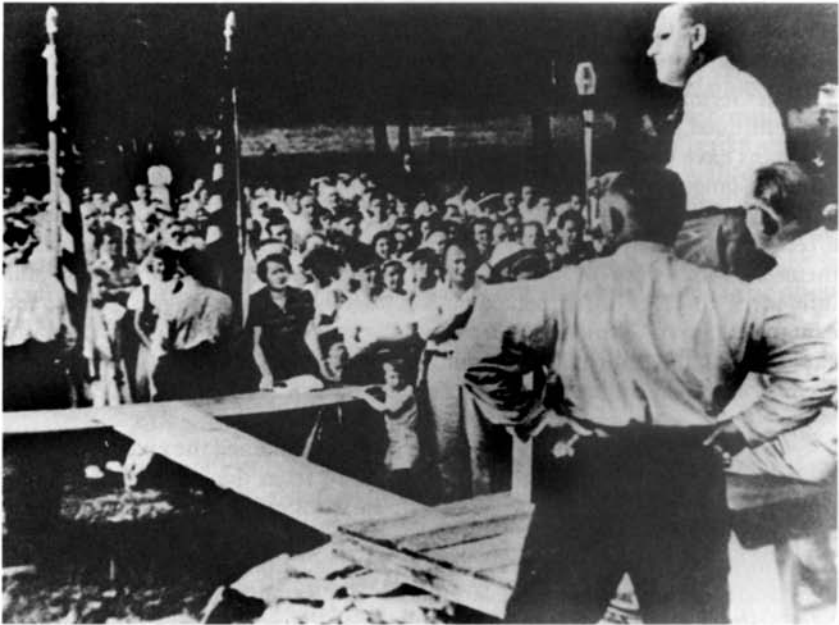


Fig. 10: The German-American Bund staged dramatic rallies, but it had very little appeal among German Americans, who recoiled from its stridency, bullyism, and racism. German-American assimilation and indifference to German issues generally by the 1930s made German Americans poor prospects for Nazism. (National Archives)

expression of German-American opinion consequently declined and, in more recent years, virtually disappeared as a reliable index of the political attitudes of those Americans for whom German ethnicity continues as a significant part of their lives. In other words, German-American leadership has disappeared even though distinctive German-American voting has continued in some quarters.

This change became apparent in the 1930s and '40s when German-American opposition to Franklin Roosevelt and his foreign policies accounted for much of what was described as midwestern isolationism. German-American voters simply wanted no involvement in another war with Germany. The domestic concomitants of fighting against one's ancestral homeland remained etched in their memories. Thus, in the presidential election of 1936, midwestern German Catholics gave strong support to William Lemke of the Union party, supported as he was by the vehemently anti-Roosevelt rhetoric of the "radio priest," Father Charles E. Coughlin of Michigan. Four years later, many thousands of other German-American

voters deserted Roosevelt for Republican Wendell Willkie, whose obviously German name and whose criticism of the drift toward war they found comforting.

Such German-American voting without the benefit of articulate leadership has continued through the decades since World War II. At the same time, the Germans have disappeared as an ethnic group in cities such as New York; the German-language press had continued its long decline into obscurity; and no politician would ever think of addressing his German ethnic constituency directly or explicitly. It is even likely that many voters of German descent are themselves unaware of the extent to which German ethnic feeling still influences their political behavior. Yet careful analysis suggests that, for example, Harry Truman's surprising victory in 1948 may be partially explained by the return of many midwestern German Catholic farmers to the Democratic fold following their defection from Roosevelt in 1940 and '44.

Sensitivity to foreign policy issues has usually explained the extent to which German-American voting can be distinguished from that of other definable collectivities, especially in the Midwest. In the 1950s, Dwight Eisenhower benefitted from Republican gains in German Catholic precincts, where resentment over the Korean War was strong. Likewise, other German-American voters bought the argument of Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy and others that the Democratic party was "soft on Communism," firmly believing that the Cold War demonstrated that the Soviet Union, not Germany, had always been America's most formidable enemy. As political analyst Kevin Phillips has observed, such a view conveniently transformed the German-American discomfort of 1935-45 into patriotic perception.

The election of 1960, which pitted the Cold Warrior Richard Nixon against the Irish Catholic John Kennedy, carried overtones of 1928. German Catholics returned strongly to the Democratic party while Republican voting was reinforced in German Protestant precincts. In 1968, however, when Nixon's Democratic opponent was a Protestant, many German Catholics once again voted Republican. In fact, Nixon's greatest gains over his 1960 performance came in German Catholic districts in midwestern states.

Such analysis only skims the surface and tests only the most obvious issues and the most prominent candidates. It is largely based on fragmentary rather than systematic analysis of data. Although historians have studied German-American political behavior in the 19th and early 20th centuries in great detail and with much sophistication, they have ignored the last three decades. Similarly, political scientists have been preoccupied in their analyses, not with white ethnic political behavior, but with more pressing questions concerning blacks, Spanish-speaking ethnic groups, and women; with basic economic and social variables; and with foreign policy issues.

Nevertheless, the cumulative record of historical scholarship during the last twenty years has revealed much about the successive concerns of German

Americans as a group. In the 19th century German immigrants were moved first by questions of their status in the American democracy and then by issues of ethnocultural clash. Still later, as immigration declined and assimilation accelerated in the 20th century, foreign policy issues became transcendent. Historical analysis also explains why strong leadership never could have emerged from the diversity of German America and how, in recent decades, German ethnic leadership has disappeared entirely, even though distinctive voting can still be discerned among certain elements within the ethnic community. A summary view of German-American political behavior thus demonstrates how strongly political developments have been conditioned by cultural influences and how intricately they are woven into the fabric of our national history.

### SUGGESTED READINGS

The bibliography of books and articles that explicitly treat the involvement of the German ethnic group in American political history is not extensive. Earlier works tended to concentrate on the achievements of prominent leaders; more recent efforts focus on the voting behavior of large numbers of ordinary people of German birth or descent. My own publications are in the latter category and include *Immigrants and Politics: The Germans of Nebraska, 1880-1900* (Lincoln, 1969); *Bonds of Loyalty: German Americans and World War I* (Dekalb, Ill., 1974); and "The Germans," in *Ethnic Leadership in America*, edited by John Higham (Baltimore, 1978), pp. 64-90, which is a study of German-American leadership during the two decades between the first and second World Wars. See also my essay, "Politics and Missouri Synod Lutherans," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 45 (May 1972), 141-58, and my edited volume, *Ethnic Voters and the Election of Lincoln* (Lincoln, 1971). These works constitute the foundation for much of this essay.

General treatments that are especially useful include the essays by Kathleen N. Conzen, "Germans," and Edward R. Kantowicz, "Politics," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, edited by Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), pp. 405-25 and 803-13. See also Joseph S. Roucek, "The Germans," in *America's Ethnic Politics*, edited by Joseph S. Roucek and Bernard Eisenberg (Greenwood, Conn., 1982), pp. 155-69. For the general context of German-American editorial opinion, see Carl F. Wittke, *The German-Language Press in America* (Lexington, Ky., 1957).

Numerous works have been published on prominent German-American political leaders. Among the best are Hans Trefousse, *Carl Schurz: A Biography* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1982), and J. Joseph Huthmacher, *Senator Robert F. Wagner and the Rise of Urban Liberalism* (New York, 1971).

German-American political behavior is an essential ingredient in a group of



books treating 19th-century American political history on the state or regional level. I have relied especially on Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, N.J., 1961); Ronald R. Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827-1861* (Princeton, N.J., 1971); Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1900* (New York, 1970), and *The Third Electoral System, 1853-1892: Parties, Voters, and Political Cultures* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979); Richard J. Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-96* (Chicago, 1971); and Samuel P. McSeveney, *The Politics of Depression: Political Behavior in the Northwest, 1893-1896* (New York, 1972).

Particularly useful for an understanding of the political behavior of German-American religious groups are Philip Gleason, *The Conservative Reformers: German-American Catholics and the Social Order* (Notre Dame, 1968), which is a study of the Central-Verein; James C. Juhnke, *A People of Two Kingdoms: The Political Acculturation of the Kansas Mennonites* (N. Newton, Kans., 1975); and Norman Graebner, "Lutherans and Politics," in *The Lutheran Church in North American Life*, edited by John E. Groh and Robert H. Smith (St. Louis, 1979), pp. 12-30.

Scholars have tended to neglect the study of German-American political behavior in the 20th century. Clifton Child, *The German-Americans in Politics, 1914-1917* (Madison, 1939) is an old-style analysis of the National German-American Alliance. Clifford Lee Nelson, *The Impact of War: German-American Political Behavior in Nebraska and Wisconsin, 1916-1920* (Lincoln, 1971) illustrates more recent concepts and methods. Ronald H. Bayor, *Neighbors in Conflict: The Irish, Germans, Jews, and Italians of New York City, 1929-1941* (Baltimore, 1978) illuminates political rivalries among different ethnic groups in an urban setting. Sander Diamond, *The Nazi Movement in the United States, 1924-1941* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1974) is an excellent analysis of that unfortunate phenomenon.

Historians have virtually ignored German-American political behavior since 1940. In their influential book, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan declared that the Germans had ceased to exist as an identifiable group in New York City. Nevertheless, much data indicate that German ethnicity continues to be an important correlate of voting behavior, especially in the Midwest. In this respect, Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1969) is especially helpful.